

INDOT Gears Up for Winter's Worst

INDOT this season is deploying an additional weapon in the battle against winter weather: tow plows.

The department this winter will deploy a total of eight tow plows, including six to be delivered next month. INDOT purchased their first tow plow in 2008 for the Northeast District. Last year a second tow plow was procured for the East Central District.

Already used in 22 other states, a tow plow and material spreader are pulled behind and to the side of INDOT's standard yellow plow truck, allowing two lanes to be cleared at once. The investment intends to optimize usage of fuel, materials, equipment and labor during snow and ice removal.

Two of the tow plows will be stationed in the Northeast District, one in the Northwest District, one in West Central District, one in the Southeast District, and three in the East Central District. Four additional tow plows have been ordered for delivery next year.

Tow plows will be used only on multilane highways and interstates. Tow plows will often partner with other plow trucks to clear adjacent lanes and provide a more consistent surface in winter weather.

INDOT drivers have been trained in operating the plows, but motorists may be a little taken aback when they first see them, said Snow & Ice Operations Manager Phil Ivy. Drivers should not attempt to pass a tow plow if all lanes are blocked, but stay a safe distance and speed behind the plows.

"You will see both lanes being plowed at the same time. This is something that people are not used to and that may freak people out," Ivy said. "From an operational standpoint, tow plows enable us to be more efficient."



A tow plow shuttled in the Northeast District demonstrates its efficiency.

Scope of Operations

INDOT performs snow and ice removal operations on more than 30,000 lane miles of Indiana interstates, U.S. highways and state routes with a fleet of more than 900 snowplows and 1,700 snowplow drivers. INDOT monitors the effectiveness of its fleet through performance targets that are based on public safety and driver expectations.



Last winter, INDOT's yellow plow trucks logged nearly 8.8 million miles – the equivalent of 353 trips around the earth or 18 round trips to the moon. INDOT plow drivers worked alternating 12- to 16-hour shifts every day for weeks or months straight, logging 526,000 man hours – the equivalent of nearly 44,000 12-hour shifts.

INDOT last winter deployed 437,000 tons of granular salt and 5.1 million gallons of salt brine on Indiana's roadways. Prior to last winter, the five-year average for salt usage was roughly 291,000 tons and salt brine was 3.4 million gallons.

Snow and ice removal is a priority for INDOT and for Indiana taxpayers, who – in a 2013 survey – ranked it as one of the most important tasks for INDOT.

Preparing for this Winter

INDOT has been preparing to tackle this winter's storms soon after last winter's last snow bank melted, said Highway Maintenance Director Jason Jones.

"We began reviewing our procedures and challenges as soon as we could after last winter's snow operations wrapped up," said Jones. "Last winter's Polar Vortex really reinforced to us the importance of planning and creating a winter operations strategy, and then dedicating the resources and manpower we need to successfully see the plan through."

INDOT began preparing for the 2014-15 winter in early April with the creation of a salt management plan and bid lettings for salt purchases. Spring equipment cleaning and facility assessments were completed by May, along with equipment reviews and repair plans. Reviews of storage capacity and requests for storage capacity improvements were completed by June.

Aggressive hiring of full-time and seasonal snow plow drivers began over the summer and continues in some locations. Annual winter training for all supervisors was completed in October, and all drivers received snow and ice training by Nov. 14.

Winter equipment readiness assessments and joint operation meetings with Indiana State Police and local officials were completed by early November. INDOT also realigned snow routes to create better efficiencies and added more plows to some routes.

Plans are now in place for monitoring weekly, daily and hourly weather reports, sending alerts for approaching inclement weather, communicating with employees, and executing action plans to deal with weather events.

INDOT's winter preparations were highlighted on social media, and through news releases and local media, during Winter Weather Preparedness Week, Nov. 16-22.



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“INDOT urges drivers to dust off their winter driving habits before snow or ice leads to a crash or slide-off,” said Commissioner Karl Browning. “This means planning extra travel time and allowing a safe distance between cars, especially our plow trucks. Remember, if the roads are blocked, plows cannot get through.”